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Reagan Will Take Some Major Risks Before Joint Session

By HEDRICK SMITH

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ONLY nine times in the past quarter of a century have American Presidents gone before a special joint session of Congress. In 1972, Richard Nixon reported on the arms agreements signed in Moscow with the Soviet leadership. In 1978, Jimmy Carter shared the triumph of the Camp David talks on the Middle East. In earlier times, Lyndon Johnson made a major address on voting rights legislation, Harry S. Truman announced Marshall Plan aid to Europe and Franklin D. Roosevelt reported on the Yalta conference.

If President Reagan wanted to seize the nation's attention and focus the political spotlight on Central America, he has done it by choosing this same august platform for a major address on that bedeviled region next Wednesday night. His extraordinary move has raised fears among Congressional Republicans that this might be an exaggerated reaction to the House Foreign Affairs Committee vote last week rejecting the President's request for another \$50 million in military aid to El Salvador.

"At that rate, can you imagine how many times he would have to come up here to defend a \$700 billion budget," asked one pro-Reagan Congressional Republican. "It's a high risk strategy because some people will say he's trying to drag us into another Vietnam," added a Senate Republican leadership source.

"There is a real opportunity for him to create bipartisan support if he stresses the U.S. commitment to economic development and to social and political justice," suggested Representative Michael Barnes, an influential Democratic critic of the Administration. "But if he comes up here and gives a Red scare speech, it will further polarize the debate; it will raise tensions not only internationally but within Congress and make it even more difficult for us to act rationally on these questions."

The White House insists it has not underestimated the risks the President is taking by obviously tying his personal prestige to success Wednesday night. For the first two years of his Administration, political advisers like White House Chief of Staff James A. Baker 3d deliberately protected him from public disfavor over the draining Salvadoran war by keeping him from being too closely tied to it. But William P. Clark, the national security adviser, has encouraged the President to speak out on Central

America, once last month and again this week.

White House officials say that Mr. Baker and his entourage enthusiastically endorsed the idea of going before a special session, partly because they wished to mend fences with Mr. Clark after persistent reports of friction between him and the Baker group. But the main impetus has been the steady erosion of support for Administration policy in Congress, discouraged by the drawn-out military struggle in El Salvador and anxious about the dangers of covertly aiding Nicaraguans fighting the Sandinists. A move to cut off funds for the covert activity was put off by the House Intelligence Committee until after Mr. Reagan's speech. In the meantime, several committee members accepted a C.I.A. invitation to take a guided tour of the secret Nicaraguan front this weekend.

"We're getting nibbled to death on Capitol Hill," a White House official acknowledged. "The perception of the situation in Central America is bad," he went on. "There's a strong feeling in the White House that the speech the President made last month was not high visibility. It did not get much attention. We had the feeling that we were seeing the beginning of a long downward roll on Central America in Congress, in the media and among the public, and if we didn't step in and stop it now, if we didn't make our case, we'd lose in the long run."

Soviet Missile Threats

President Reagan found fresh support for his case in the disclosure last week that Brazil had stopped four Libyan planes from carrying munitions to Nicaragua under the guise of medical supplies. "The episode," he said, "when the aspirin they were supposed to be carrying turned out to be hand grenades and things, is just further evidence that there are outside forces, all of them principally aligned with or sympathetic to the Communist bloc, who are in there and intervening in the legitimate affairs of those countries."

Another serious worry lies in Soviet threats to put medium-range missiles into the Caribbean area in reprisal for scheduled American missile deployments in Western Europe later this year. Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger reminds visitors that this shows the dangers of allowing neighbors like Nicaragua or El Salvador to fall under forces linked to Moscow.